The New Belgium Reflected in Its Embassy

By AARON HARDY ULM

WHAT for four years was the house of gloom on Washington avenues of diplomacy might now be termed a mansion of joy. It is the Belgian embassy. Despite the smallness of the country—it is not as large as many counties in western states—the Belgian establishment was raised from legation rank a year or two ago as a sort of memorial to that nation's heroic part in the late war.

And, seemingly as an expression of delight over the honor thus conferred, as well as with the changed conditions that foreran it, the Belgian diplomatists set up a handsome ambassadorial plant in our capital.

It is located on Massachusetts avenue, near Dupont Circle, a large three-storied building of pleasing design occupied for several years by the Brazilian embassy. The property belonged to the Ingalls estate, from which it has been purchased by the Belgian Government as a permanent embassy home.

The Belgians moved into their new Washington house just before the visit to this country of their king last year, and His Majesty, King Albert, was entertained there, although he lived elsewhere during his stay in Washington.

While the embassy building seems somewhat out of proportion in size to the country that owns it, one can hardly blame little Belgium thus to celebrate its restored independence, even if that should be the inside reason for the display. In fact, when one studies the foreign diplomatic establishments in Washington the contrast between building and size, if not importance, of the government represented, is often to be noted. With one or two exceptions, the least impressive structures house the ménages of the most important governments, which somehow seem to adopt the philosophy that those who have fully arrived have no need for display.

Though the marks of war will never be eliminated completely from the Belgian landscape or from the soul of the Belgians, they at the embassy assure you that the little country has restored itself to a degree that is astonishing.

Belgian industry, they say, has been rehabilitated to a point closely approaching the pre-war level; agriculture is so completely on its feet that one of the best crops in the country's history will be harvested this year, and a general measure of human comfort prevails there as nowhere else in Continental Europe. All that has been brought about in the two years since the armistice gave Belgium back to the Belgians, but gave it back so battered that rehabilitation meant almost the reconstruction of the nation's life.

"Our country, the first to be invaded by the Germans, promises to be the first to recuperate completely from the war," said a member of the Belgian embassy staff to the writer. "During the occupation the Germans stripped the country of all possible resources, carrying away most of our machinery, stocks of raw materials and even cattle and horses. In many instances that which couldn't be removed was destroyed.

"But as soon as the country was evacuated our people set courageously to work and have achieved remarkable results.

"The railroads, many of which were completely out of commission, have been almost fully restored. Freight and passenger traffic is now near normal, though, like those of other countries, our railroads are short of rolling stock. The navigable waterways, which mean much to Belgium, are now being used as fully as before the war.

"Save in the regions that were covered by army operations, the land has been put under more intensive cultivation than ever before. The West Flanders, Ypres and Dixmude areas, which were so torn up as to make their restoration to the plow a problem of years, are not large; for, though all Belgium was swept by German armies, the occupation was so complete that there wasn't much long-continued fighting on Belgian soil."

It seems that last year's crop, the first following the war, promised exceedingly well but, as it matured, it suffered tremendously from a new and unexpected evil, trench rats. With the fighting areas abandoned by the troops, the big rats, hungry and aggressive, left the trenches and sought sustenance in the fields of farmers. A large part of the maturing crop was destroyed by them. During last winter, the Belgian farmers made violent war on the new invader. Thousands of big trench rats were slain and turned into earnings. Rat skins, for use in fur-making, were salable at from five to ten cents apiece; and many a woman, it would appear, is now adorning herself with skins that came from the spectacular and forbidding creatures of the war trenches. Thus the slaughter of the rats was hastened, with the result that Belgian farmers expect little damage this year.

Belgium, however, is at no time self-sustaining in a food sense, and will probably continue to import from one-fourth to one-third of its food supplies.

This condition is not due to infertile soil but to the scarcity thereof. The soil is the best cultivated in the world. But in Belgium, the most thickly populated of countries, there are about 400 persons to each square mile of territory. This makes it necessary for the Belgians to depend upon their industries for existence.

Those industries, for a nation so minute in a sense of area, are numerous and varied. Belgium has much coal but not of sufficient varieties to take care of all industries. And there are other minerals, chiefly tin.

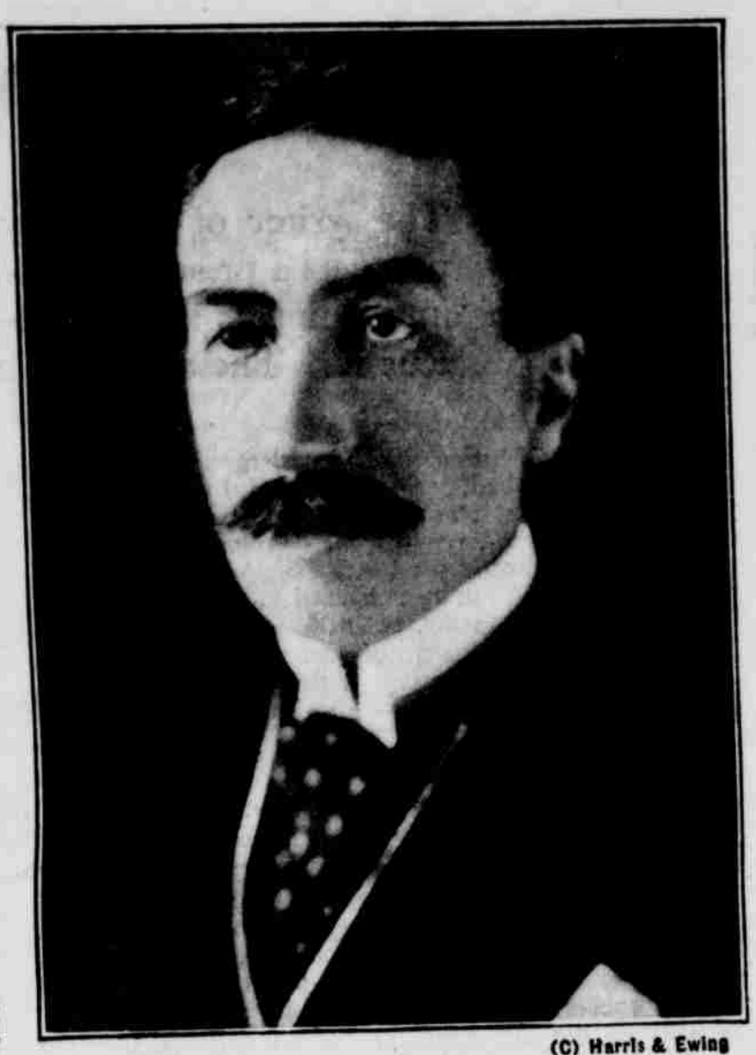
Iron works constitute the first or second industry. To a great extent they have been rehabilitated and are now in operation. Likewise the glass industry, in which Belgium leads the world, is now operating on a basis more than 75 per cent normal. We are already importing much glassware from that country.

Textiles also constitute a big portion of Belgian industries. The cotton mills of Ghent are now approaching full normal production. Restoration of the linen industry has been held back by lack of machinery and the fact that flax farming centered in those areas most affected by active fighting.

During the last two years, Belgium has depended very largely on this country for raw materials and for food. But that dependency is now being lessened. Food supplies are so nearly normal that purchase cards are used only for sugar. Belgium still needs much machinery, for which it looks chiefly to America. All outside purchases of foreign goods are made through a governmental commission which, for operations in this country, maintains a New York office. Hence there is not yet any room for a traveling salesman in that country, for no one could buy from him.

"If a shoemaker needs fifty pounds of foreign leather, he must have the government procure it for him," said a member of the embassy staff. "This system is employed to keep prices down to the lowest possible level and to prevent the profiteering that would occur under an open market system of outside buying and selling."

Buying in this country has been rendered difficult by the exchange situation, though Belgian currency, as a rule, has ranged of higher value, as defined by United States money, than that of any other Continental war country, France not excepted. Incidentally, it seems, from what persons at the various embassies say, that which Continental Europe wants most from America are aids to and not the products of industry; that is to say, machinery, including farm implements. Europe appears to appreciate the necessity of producing what it needs, but that necessity is much further from fulfillment than prior to the war.



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BARON de CARTIER de MARCHIENNE

Minister during most of the war period and now ambassador to the United States.

Reduced man power has been accentuated by high wages and shortened working days, as well as by the shell-shocked state of the public mind. Therefore, tools are needed to supplement human hands as never before.

It is surprising also to find nearly all the war-swept countries reporting crop prospects that are not only normal but in many cases far above pre-war figures, despite the terrible paucity of farm stock and implements.

"Even at the present rate of wages, high in Belgium as elsewhere, we can import raw materials and manufacture the goods we need cheaper than we can import the finished product, with few exceptions," said an attaché at the Belgian embassy. "And that is what we are doing and intend to do—take care of ourselves by our own industry and skill."

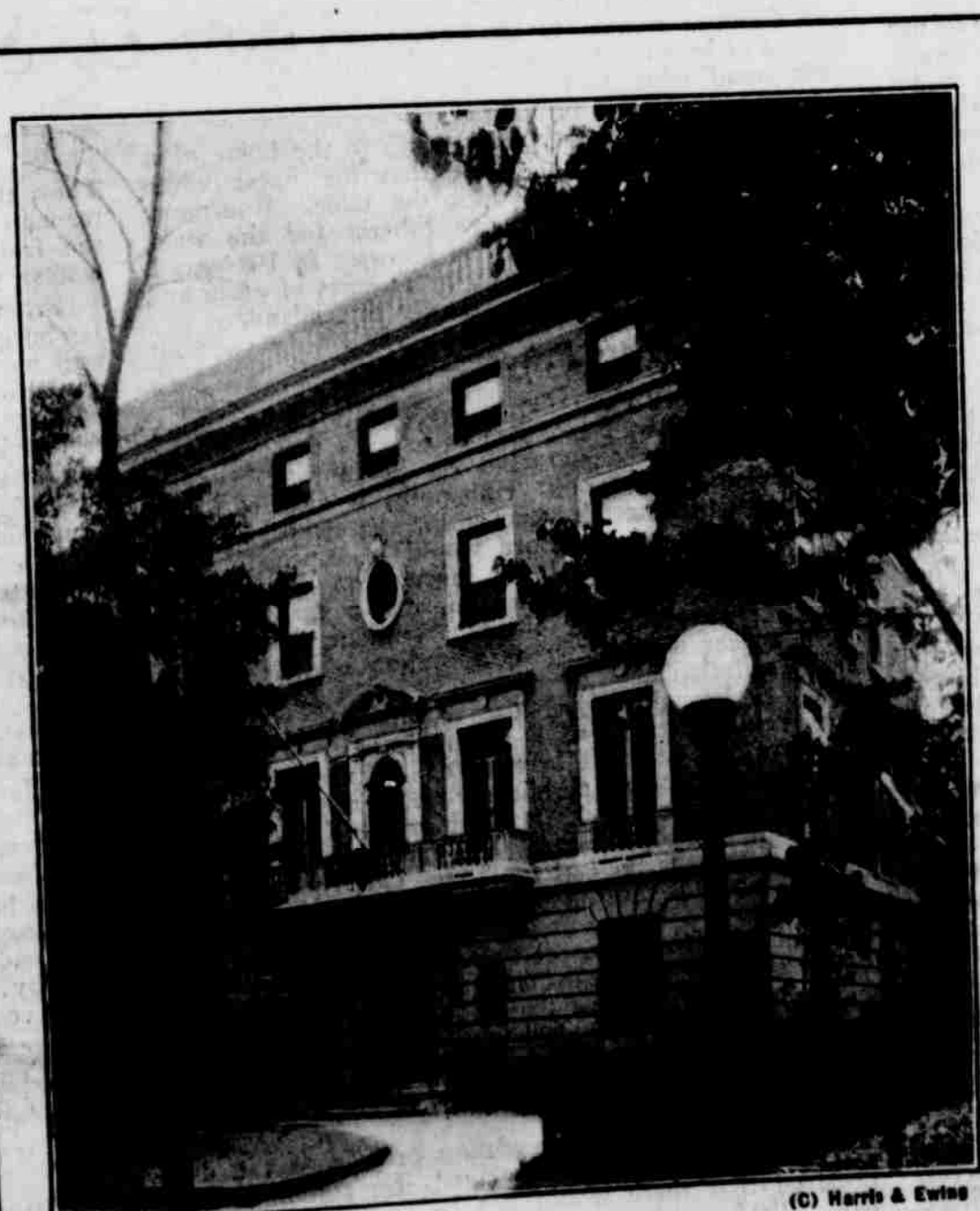
"Are many of your people planning to emigrate to America as soon as travel becomes easy?" he was asked.

"Almost none," he replied. "The Belgians, though the most crowded of European peoples, are not of the migrating kind. You have very few, as compared with other European stocks, in this country. The Belgian not only prefers Belgium to all other lands but under normal conditions he can live more comfortably and satisfactorily there than elsewhere. This is because wealth is distributed with an evenness characteristic of few other countries, and because of natural favors our countrymen enjoy on a basis of equal opportunities, for Belgium is motivated by truly democratic spirit. We have our radicals, but there are few extreme radicals in Belgium. The Socialist party is strong, but it is not by any means a Bolshevist party."

"When I returned to Belgium following the armistice," said my informant who was in the foreign diplomatic service throughout the war, "I was prepared for most of what I saw. Hence I viewed the evidences of war without much outward emotion until I came to Louvain. Then I cried for the first and only time. The sight of those ruins beyond repair was too much for me."

The Belgian embassy in its magnificent building is much quieter now than it was two years ago when, as a legation, the quarters were less imposing. Work incident to war conditions, when this country was looked to in the main to save the body of the people there from starvation, called for a big operating force. At times the personnel numbered more than 100; at the time of which I write it is less than a dozen.

Baron de Cartier de Marchienne, who has represented Belgium in America since 1917, is of sixth rank in length of service among the foreign diplomatic representatives in Washington. He has been abroad considerably since the war ended. While in Europe last year he and the present Baroness de Cartier de Marchienne were married. She is an American, as was Baron de Cartier's first wife, who died several years ago. The baron is a diplomat by profession.



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THE BELGIAN EMBASSY